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ABSTRACT

The paper examines ethnicity in American society and the role of ethnic studies in education in the context of a critical response to a paper presented at the National Council for the Social Studies in November, 1977. The original study, "Ethnicity and the Schools," by Daniel Selakovich, claimed that ethnic studies should play no role in education because ethnic heritages are either dead or reflective of a distant and no longer meaningful past. Selakovich contended that every ethnic group was willing to submerge its ethnic identity in order to merge into mainstream American society. Conversely, this reaction paper states that American society is as ethnically diverse today as at any time in history and that the schools have a responsibility to reflect this diversity. The reaction paper further criticizes Selakovich's views on six topics: (1) belief in the American Dream as opposed to belief in ethnic identity; (2) racism in American society; (3) the relationship of pluralism to racism; (4) continuation of ethnic heritage impact on a group which has emigrated; (5) the ability of American teachers to teach ethnic studies; and (6) the role of the schools in promoting ethnicity. The conclusion is that, in refutation of Selakovich's major contention, ethnic studies should be offered in the schools because it is an excellent method of helping students understand and develop skills for coping with the diversity in American society. (Author/DB)

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REACTION PAPER TO "ETHNICITY AND THE SCHOOLS"

Anthony V. Codianni - University of Minnesota

Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (Cincinnati, Ohio, November 23-26, 1977)

SO 010 655

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In his paper, "Ethnicity and the Schools," Daniel Selakovich claims that: "Ethnic studies in the schools are not the answer to anything." He further asserts that, "ethnic studies as such should have no place in the schools." I disagree with this point of view. American society is as ethnically diverse today as at any time in its history, and the schools have a responsibility to reflect the reality of this diversity. It cannot be ignored, it must permeate the school curriculum. Only then will our students learn to work and live in harmony with those whose values, traditions, and behavior patterns differ from their own.

First, let me make a brief attempt at defining and clarifying some important terms and trends -- ethnicity, cultural pluralism, and ethnic studies -- since these are at the core of the argument.

Ethnicity is a sense of groupness based on common ancestry and common historical background and focused on one or more symbolic elements as the epitome of the group -- e.g., kinship patterns, religion, language, tribal affiliations, nationality.[1] It is "a composite of shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, consciousness of kind within the group, ... in-group memories and loyalties, certain structured relationships within the group, and a trend toward preferential endogamy."[2] Ethnic groups have always been a part of American society, and ethnicity has been a significant force throughout our country's history. As immigrant groups reached our shores, they interacted with those already here, and each became a new cultural group, borrowing elements from other groups while retaining part of its heritage from the past. The Irish who came here became Irish-Americans with a heritage and ethnic identity different from German-Americans and Italian-Americans and Chinese-Americans.

Selakovich suggests that for many of these groups their heritage is dead; it is not a living tradition. Indeed, he claims that we haven't enough teachers to teach American children about all the "dead and dying cultures" of our society.

To believe that ethnic cultures/heritages are dead or reflect only the distant past is to ignore the facts. The history of those peoples who became Irish-Americans or Chinese-Americans did not stop with their arrival in the United States. The heritage of the Chinese-American is different from that of a current resident of China, but it is also significantly different from an Italian-American or Swedish-American. American society reflects the constant evolution and interaction and synthesis of ethnic groups within its boundaries. The transcontinental railroad, the gold fields, Chinatown, the Chinese Exclusion Act, are all part of the Chinese-American heritage. The Irish-American heritage includes experiences in the coal mines, urban bosses, and John F. Kennedy. These are only a few examples of living and dynamic elements in the ethnic heritages of our society. They are not museum pieces; they are the flesh and blood experiences of real people in a living history -- American History.

Many would argue -- and apparently Selakovich would agree -- that these ethnic differences are slowly disappearing. Again, the facts do not support this point of view. Since the end of World War II, more than seven million people have immigrated to the United States. In 1965 the Congress passed an immigration law doing away with the national origins quota system. The impact of this change has been a shift away from the predominance of Western European immigrants. Immigration has increased from Italy, Greece, and other southern European countries

formerly discriminated against. But Asian immigration has seen the greatest change -- an increase of 500 percent since the years before 1965. "Even today immigrants are still entering the country at the rate of about 400,000 a year. Moreover they are ethnically more diverse than ever before. In 1973 there were 173,000 arrivals from the western hemisphere, 124,000 from Asia, 93,000 from Europe and 7000 from Africa."[3] These figures do not include illegal aliens and the recently arrived Vietnamese refugees. It is clear that ethnicity will continue to be an important force in American society for years to come.

The question of what to do with this ethnicity, of how to accommodate it to the values and goals of the broader society, has led to controversy and conflict at various points in our history. The melting pot, of course, was one answer seized upon by many. There is no need to belabor the point; but if the melting pot had been a satisfactory answer, the inequities that exist between ethnic groups today would not exist. Selakovich seems to believe that everyone, every group, wanted to be melted. He claims that: "Every group, in turn, tried to get in. Every group was willing to submerge its own identity if necessary." (p. 2) The record is clear that this was not the case. On the contrary, benevolent societies, self-help organizations, social clubs, religious organizations, and even privately funded schools were used by a large number of ethnic groups to see that their unique identities were not submerged. Many groups - Jews, Chinese, Japanese, etc. -- established their own schools to transmit their unique cultural heritages. These schools operated in addition to the public schools. In other cases, the children of particular ethnic groups attended parochial schools; Irish and Italian

children for a large part attended Catholic schools. In still other cases, ethnic groups sought to make the public schools more responsive to their cultures. In 1880, for example, Bohemian parents in Chicago tried to establish Bohemian language classes in the schools. The following appeared in Sovornost, a Bohemian-American newspaper:

> The petition of 258 parents and guardians of children attending the Throop School, for the inclusion of the Bohemian language as a study, which was referred to a special committee for consideration some two weeks ago was the cause of considerable debate on the part of the school board yesterday. [4]

Are these the efforts of groups willing to submerge their identities?

Cultural pluralism has emerged as a more realistic response to the ethnic diversity of our society. Selakovich sees this pluralism more as a political strategy than a social movement. He claims that two of the strongest reasons for pluralism are that "the politics of the welfare state bases its rewards on identifiable ethnic or racial groups" and that "ethnic racial groups have been politically successful." What evidence is there to substantiate these claims?

The welfare system is not designed to care for any specific ethnic groups. Social security, Medicare, unemployment insurance, family assistance programs, and other government transfer payments are designed to help people with specific needs regardless of race, national origin, or religious preference. On page 12 of his paper, Selakovich speaks of "federal and state tax dollars distributed on the basis of ethnic formulas." No such formulas exist. There are no laws which distribute funds solely on the basis of ethnic background. The formulas used for welfare programs are rather based on such factors as income, employability, age, family size. The fact that some ethnic groups have higher proportions

of their members receiving public assistance is a reflection of the past and present discriminatory practices which have led to their current condition; it is not due to any ethnically-based formula for distribution of funds.

And the idea that "ethnic racial groups have been politically successful" is difficult to believe. What is political success? Getting elected? Well, how many Chicano or Native American or Black Presidents have there been recently? How about Italian-American, Chinese-American, or Jewish-American? Look at the Senate and at the House of Representatives. Do the facts bear out Selakovich's argument? There must be some other measures. One might be economic well-being. Those groups which are politically successful should reflect that success in better economic conditions. Then, why is the unemployment rate among Blacks higher than among Whites? Why is the average income of Filipino-Americans lower than the national average? Why are there so few Polish-Americans represented on the boards of directors of U.S. corporations?

To support his claim that ethnic racial groups have been politically successful, Selakovich cites Glazer and Moynihan who argue that the "smaller and more cohesive" ethnic group more effectively asserts claims than do "loosely aggregated groups such as 'workers' . . . ." (p. 10) Can they really believe that any ethnic group wields greater political clout than does organized labor? Is there a Department of Ethnicity? Are federal mediators available to help resolve ethnic conflicts? Such political success may, indeed, be apparent at the local level where ethnic groups are tight-knit and vocal, but this is clearly not the case nationally.

Social/cultural factors are more important as bases for cultural pluralism than are political factors. Pluralism is not an official political policy, rather it is a societal condition in which members of ethnic groups may choose to practice a great deal or a little of their ethnic heritage without fear of political or physical reprisal, in which differences in cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors are accepted, and in which different ethnic communities are allowed to exist side-by-side. Ethnic groups serve as foci of community for many -- not all -- Americans. As such they provide important mediating structures between the individual and the larger society. According to Rubin, such structures possess five important characteristics:[5]

1. They are concrete organizations;
2. They are intermediate in size;
3. They provide a setting for extensive social interaction, both primary and secondary;
4. They fall in institutional areas considered important by the standards of society; but
5. They need not be tied to a territorial base.

Ethnic groups possess these characteristics, and they are possessed by other groups as well -- professional organizations, unions, political parties, etc. It must be recognized that ethnic communities are not crucial to all Americans. Yet that is what pluralism is all about; it allows people to live different life-styles, to be members of different communities. A quick analysis of America's diversity by Tumin illustrates the basis for cultural pluralism:[6]

> Its people worship in over 220 different denominational institutions, not to mention the many who do not worship at all. There are at least five prominent categories of racial membership and more than 100 different national

> origins. The nationality groups, as commonly described, are themselves often names that cover numbers of quite distinct ethnic groups; to complicate matters further, these often cross national boundary lines. There are at least six, if not more, regional subcultures, often with large differences in dialect and life style. Moreover, the numerous and diverse Indian tribes should not be ignored; all of them had distinct cultures at one time and many still do or wish to revive their ancient cultures. Crosscutting these national, ethnic, racial, religious, regional, and tribal distinctions are the subcultures of the age groups, the socioeconomic classes, and the sexes.

Given this kind of diversity and a societal condition in which it is accepted, many have called for more extensive attention to ethnicity in our school curricula. The most common term used to describe such efforts is "ethnic studies." But "ethnic studies" means different things to different people. Selakovich does not define what he means when speaking of ethnic studies; however, some inferences may be drawn from his comments. It appears from his assertion that "there are not enough teachers, resources or resource people to teach American children the values of all the dead and dying cultures that exist or have existed in the society" (p. 24) that Selakovich sees ethnic studies as a series of rather discrete studies of single cultures. This inference is further supported by his claim that "it doesn't follow that the schools should teach every known culture in depth." (p. 24) Furthermore, this serial single-culture approach tends to focus on the heroes and contributions of minority (he uses the term interchangeably with ethnic) groups to American society. This is illustrated by the following statement: "The real meaning of ethnicity is not the great contribution each succeeding ethnic group has made to 'American culture'." (p. 26) Finally, he sees ethnic studies as independent of the basic skills, and of little or no use in furthering their development. "Learning to read and write,"

Selakovich claims, "is much more important to children who do not have these skills than an understanding of their heritage." (p. 25)

This perception does not accurately reflect current approaches in ethnic studies, rather it reflects many of the earlier attempts in minority studies curriculum. A review of literature in the field of ethnic studies done by the Ethnic Cultural Center of the Minneapolis Public Schools revealed that ethnic studies programs began primarily as minority studies classes. These courses tended to focus on single groups and to employ a chronological approach. Furthermore, many early efforts in the area of ethnic studies focused not only on specific groups, but also on the major historical heroes of each group. This was one means employed to provide positive role models for minority youth.[7]

This "Great Man" approach to minority studies has, however, met with increasing disfavor. James Banks recognized the need to improve the academic standing of ethnic studies when he asserted that "the emphasis should be on higher levels of knowledge (such as concepts and principles), the building of new assumptions, and not on the mastery of discrete facts about 'heroes' and insignificant historical events."[8] The latest curriculum efforts in ethnic studies employ new views of content, skills, and concepts in a comparative approach. Such an approach was described by Herman:[8]

> Multi-group approaches to ethnic studies should include the study of many groups on a comparative basis, investigating common problems and crucial differences. They should demonstrate such basic concepts as ethnicity, identity, discrimination, integration, assimilation, accommodation, amalgamation, acculturation, pluralism, marginality, and others. This treatment includes the

> richness of cultural diversity, the role and contributions of both white and non-white cultural groups, and the expression of ethnicity in American life.

Such an approach does not ignore the problems and conflicts related to ethnicity, nor does it avoid the teaching of important intellectual skills. On the contrary, this approach to ethnic studies seeks to attain the same kinds of knowledge, value, and skill objectives common throughout the social studies. It seeks to develop important concepts and generalizations. It seeks to develop attitudes and values important in a democratic society. It seeks to develop skills of locating data, organizing data, analyzing data, and decision-making. But it seeks to attain these objectives using content and issues which reflect the diversity of our society.

Now that our disagreements on terms and trends have been clarified, I will turn to a consideration of some specific points made by Selakovich. He identifies six major assumptions (p. 14) on which the resurgent ethnicity is supposedly based and then reputes each assumption in turn. Although I believe he has missed some other more important reasons for this resurgence, I will limit this discussion to those six assumptions.

According to Selakovich, the first assumption on which the new ethnicity is based is that "the American dream is dead." He asserts that many people see attachment to an ethnic group as "something to believe in," as a substitute to the American dream. It may be true that some have lost confidence in America's institutions, but very few have rejected its ideals. The very fact that so many immigrants have become, and continue to become, citizens is a clear illustration of the belief in American ideals. Greeley illustrated the relationship of citizenship and American ideals in the following statement:[9]

> . . . . the founding fathers decided--as the early naturalization laws make clear--that the central core of beliefs that was to create the American nation would consist of certain political principles as contained in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Citizenship would be granted to the man who was willing to be a "citizen" in the Enlightenment sense of the word, that is to say, a man who committed himself to the political principles of the eighteenth century which were enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. No one could be excluded from citizenship whatever his religion, his ethnicity, or his heritage so long as he was willing to pledge allegiance to these political principles.

It has been these very political principles and their success which have made possible the resurgence in ethnicity. Proclaiming one's ethnic identity need not imply a rejection of American ideals. Indeed, the opposite may be true; the freedom to participate in the political, economic, and social systems may lead to an increased willingness to identify with one's ethnic heritage.

Selakovich claims that the assumption that our institutions were racist in orientation is difficult to support. Any institution that through its policies and practices promotes the values and life-styles of one group while seeking to suppress those of others is, however, racist in nature. Vecoli cited the words of one turn-of-the-century educator who advocated such policies and practices:[10]

> Our task is to assimilate or amalgamate these people as part of the American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law, order, and popular government.

That such policies and practices were actually followed has often been documented. One example came from the NEA survey team in Arizona in the late 1960's:[11]

> In most states, the schools are actually mandated by law to make English the language of instruction. . . . In some schools the speaking of Spanish is forbidden both in classrooms and on the playground, except, of course, in classes where Spanish is taught. Not infrequently students have been punished for lapsing into Spanish. This has even extended to corporal punishment. A member of our Survey team tells of one school at which such punishment was dealt out to children who lapsed into Spanish despite the fact that 99 percent of the school's enrollment was Mexican-American! The obvious theory is that a child will learn English if he is required to speak English and nothing but English, at least during those hours of the day when he is in school. 'If you want to be American, speak American,' he is admonished over and over again.

The schools' requirement for order, discipline, and organization may well have led to uniformity in language, values, etc.; however, the selection of which language and values was based on other ideological, not practical, concerns. Certainly, a school in which 99 percent of the students were Spanish speakers would have been easier to control if Spanish, not English, had been used as the primary language of instruction!

The third assumption on which Selakovich claims the new ethnicity is based is that pluralism will eliminate racism. He claims this will not be the case and cites the experiences of many other nations to support his claim. Although this supporting evidence comes from different nations and is based on a pluralism defined by "official recognition and legal status" of ethnic groups (a pluralism which approaches separatism), I agree with Selakovich that pluralism is not likely to eliminate racism. I am not sure we will ever see its elimination. On the other hand, pluralism certainly has the potential for reducing tension between groups. When our students recognize that differences do not imply better

or worse, they will be more tolerant of those who have different values, customs, and lifestyles. The importance of a multi-ethnic curriculum in helping our students develop this tolerance was recognized by the Minneapolis Public Schools in a Report on Racism:[12]

> Given the nature of racism, one can readily see the connection to the enthnocentric movement. By promoting a mono-curriculum in a diverse society which defines success by color is to create conditions for human oppression through institutional arrangements. If diversity among white ethnics is suppressed, then obviously racial distinctiveness is enhanced. One's race becomes paramount at the expense of one's ethnicity. Accordingly, when the curriculum is designed and supportive of the 'centrism', outsiders (non-white racial groups) would be lost . . . .

The recognition of ethnic diversity supported by the Minneapolis Racism Report is not dependent, as Selakovich claims, on the assumption that cultures tend to be static. As I pointed out earlier, the history of a given ethnic group did not stop cold upon arrival in the United States. The heritages of these groups include their experiences in this country as well as in their "homelands." Their heritages are French-American, Japanese-American, Ukrainian-American, and African-American. The American after French, Japanese, Ukrainian, and African adds a new dimension to these heritages; it insures their vitality and dynamism in our society.

Furthermore, it is important to note that there are significant differences between individuals within these ethnic groups, they are not monolithic.

Next, Selakovich argues that teachers cannot, as some assume they can, "identify, understand and respect the variety of cultural backgrounds of their clients." (p. 14) Nor can they be expected to "know

even a small group of minority 'cultures' well enough to understand them and somehow work this understanding into their teaching." My initial response to this claim is that if it is accurate, then it is a strong argument in favor of ethnic diversity of teaching staffs. But it is inaccurate. For one thing, it assumes a serial single-culture, "great man" approach to ethnic studies. If teachers seek to help their students develop concepts and principles and analytic skills, it will be these which guide the understanding of ethnic diversity in our society. Students will use these intellectual tools to understand various aspects of different ethnic groups and to investigate issues and problems related to ethnicity in our society. One final word on this point is in order -- if our teachers cannot "respect the variety of cultural backgrounds of their clients," we really are in trouble!

The last assumption Selakovich seeks to refute is that "pluralism in society and education is a good thing." It should be clear by now that I believe that it is, indeed, a "good thing." Everything I have said so far, and everything I will say in the remainder of this paper, is designed to persuade you that this is the case. Before passing on to the next point, however, it is important here to reemphasize a point made earlier. That point is that pluralism reflects the reality of ethnic diversity in our society. One cannot ignore the fact that over 34 million people were identified by the 1960 U.S. census as "foreign-stock" (foreign-born or with at least one foreign-born parent). Nor can we ignore the fact that Blacks, Chicanos, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and other highly visible groups have not been assimilated into the melting pot. That's a total of about 65 million people with

clearly visible ethnic identities.

Now, let me turn to Selakovich's reasons why "the schools should not be in the business of fostering, encouraging and promoting ethnicity or 'cultural pluralism'." (p. 24) First, he claims that the schools are not "competent to deal with ethnicity" because they cannot "teach every known culture in depth." This has never stopped teachers and schools from teaching world history, area studies, geography, or anthropology. If one recognizes that ethnic studies can provide analytic tools for investigating groups, issues, events, and problems, it becomes clear that schools <u>can</u> competently "deal with ethnicity." Such an approach to ethnic studies will also help all students to learn not only "how the system works and how to cope with it," but also ways in which they may peacefully and effectively bring about needed changes in that system. In this way ethnic studies will increase students' intellectual skills while furthering their knowledge of the diverse heritages of the United States; it will, indeed, help meet the "real needs of minority group children."

The approach to ethnic studies described here will certainly present students with a more realistic perception of the "meaning of ethnicity in American society." By focusing student attention on major themes and issues in our history and the relationship of ethnicity to these, ethnic studies will help students to recognize some of the important forces in intergroup relations in this country. They will learn to analyze reasons why the members of certain ethnic groups "have a greater chance of being poor and undereducated than most Americans." They will also analyze ways of changing these conditions.

Selakovich claims that ethnic studies "contribute to an increase in inter-group conflict" and that the schools "should be emphasizing . . . . . the commonalities of the people, the ideals and goals we hold in common, the common problems we must solve, the similarities and fraternal bonds we have as a people." (p. 26) A comparative, thematic approach to ethnic studies does not ignore these commonalities. On the contrary, it recognizes that some discrimination has been faced by almost all groups in our society. It recognizes that Jewish-American, Italian-American, Finnish-American, and Irish-American workers fought to organize unions and win concessions for workers. It recognizes that immigration and the resultant acculturation process caused serious problems of adjustment for many ethnic groups. But recognizing our commonalities must not blind us to our differences; slavery and the Japanese-American internment were unique forms of discrimination experienced by specific groups. These differences are real, and our students must know this and know how to interact with others who are different. It is when people are frightened or threatened by such differences that conflict arises; ethnic studies can help reduce such fear and intimidation. This was recognized by two students from John Dewey High School in Brooklyn, New York, when they said:[13]

> Our city has many racial pressures, some of which are manifested within the educational system and cause internal stress. We feel that one of the viable solutions to counteract this problem is a massive concentration on the study of the various ethnic groups, individually or collectively, that make up the diverse American culture.

The final argument made by Selakovich is that "official recognition of ethnicity tends to encourage segregation." Again, a comparative

approach to ethnic studies focuses on themes, concepts, and principles. As such it may be infused into various social studies courses focusing on American society, or it may stand alone as a separate course. But it does not focus on particular ethnic groups; and, therefore, it does not promote segregation.

In conclusion, I wish to point out that I share many of Daniel Selakovich's concerns. We should seek ways to avoid conflict in our diverse society. Teachers should be better educated in the influences of ethnicity on our society. We should emphasize the skills needed to cope with our society, to recognize a need for change when it becomes apparent, and to take appropriate action to effect such change. The schools should recognize the commonalities of people in our society. And we should avoid stereotyping individuals from any ethnic group. It is my belief, however, that well-conceived teacher training programs, effective multi-ethnic teaching materials, and a carefully designed, comparative approach to ethnic studies can be the best way to insure that these goals are attained. In this way teachers will truly be better able to "cope with pluralism now as always."

FOOTNOTES

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4. Feistein, S. and Costello, L. (eds.), The Ordeal of Assimilation: A Documentary History of the White Working Class, New York, Anchor Books, 1974, p. 134.

5. Rubin, I., "Ethnicity and Cultural Pluralism," in Weinberg, D. (ed.), Ethnicity: A Conceptual Approach, Cleveland Ethnic Heritage Studies, Cleveland State University, 1976, p. 93-94.

6. Tumin, M. M. and Plotch, W. (eds.), Pluralism in a Democratic Society, New York, Praeger, 1977, p. xii.

7. Ethnic Cultural Center, ECC Report, Department of Intergroup Education, Minneapolis Public Schools, 1976, Mimeo.

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9. Greeley, A. M., "The Future of the Ethnic 'Revival'," in Weinberg, D. (ed.), Ethnicity: A Conceptual Approach, Cleveland Ethnic Heritage Studies, Cleveland State University, 1976, p. 20.

10. Vecoli, R. J., "Why Our Melting Pot Cooled Off," Minneapolis Tribune, February 27, 1972, p. 19A.

11. NEA - Tucson Survey, "The Invisible Minority," in John Burma (ed.), Mexican-Americans in the United States, Massachusetts, Schenkman Publishing Co., 1970, p. 110.

12. Task Force on Racism in Education, Toward Educational Renewal in the Seventies: A Report on Racism in Education for the Minneapolis Public Schools, Minneapolis Public Schools, Mimeo, 1974, p. 36.

13. Marcus, S. R. and Richman, P. J., "From the Other Side of the Desk: A Call for Ethnic Studies," Social Education, Volume 41, October, 1977, p. 537.